



## Watershed plan critical, Arkansans on panel say

BY ROBERT J. SMITH

Posted on Friday, September 29, 2006

URL: <http://www.nwanews.com/adg/News/168099/>

MONKEY ISLAND, Okla. — Arkansas officials criticized their Oklahoma counterparts Thursday for failing to help develop an Illinois River watershed management plan.

Oklahoma should show more interest in such a plan, Arkansas' Randy Young said during the annual meeting of the Arkansas-Oklahoma Arkansas River Compact Commission.

"We haven't even been able to get a meeting with Oklahoma to start working on that," said Young, a commissioner who also directs the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission.

Oklahoma commissioners said developing a plan with a federal lawsuit pending against poultry companies in Arkansas would be difficult.

"It's the poultry question," said Oklahoma commissioner Miles Tolbert, the state's secretary of environment. "Until that's resolved, I wouldn't be too optimistic about a plan."

Tolbert met briefly with Young after Thursday's meeting, agreeing that they'd communicate soon to see if there's any point in talking about a plan for the watershed that's partly in each state.

Young believes Oklahoma is refusing to work on the plan because Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson has told state agencies not to meet with Arkansas officials about anything of significance, Young said in an interview. Young thinks that's because of a federal lawsuit, filed by Edmondson in June 2005, that accuses the companies of polluting the watershed with runoff from poultry litter.

"I think [Edmondson] doesn't want them to talk," Young said. "That's it."

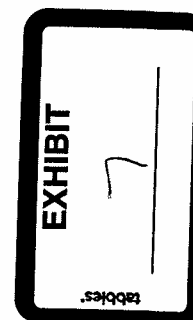
Charlie Price, a spokesman for Edmondson's office, said Young is wrong.

"There's been no directive from us," Price said in a telephone interview. "Absolutely not. I don't know anything about a canceled meeting."

Edmondson in a previous interview said he discouraged Oklahoma state agencies from meeting with Arkansas officials if the attorney general's office wasn't "privy" to what was being discussed.

The states signed a "statement of joint principles and actions" regarding the Illinois River watershed in December 2003. At the time, Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee called it the end to a "bitter, harsh, sometimes unfriendly conflict" between the states.

The document, approved by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, includes provisions that require Northwest Arkansas' largest cities to reduce the amount of



phosphorus they discharge into streams that flow into Oklahoma. It also encourages the states to work together on ways to use excess poultry litter and to develop the watershed plan that Young mentioned Thursday.

Luanne Diffin, chairman of the Illinois River Watershed Partnership, said in a telephone interview that a meeting about the management plan was scheduled last spring in Van Buren. The partnership received a grant from the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission to help develop the plan. Arkansas state officials planned to attend.

Diffin said Dan Butler, water quality director for the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, called the day before the meeting and said he was "told he couldn't come."

"Dan called and said he couldn't meet because of the litigation, and it wasn't advisable because of the litigation," Diffin said.

Butler and Mike Thralls, director of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, were out of the office Thursday attending funerals and were unavailable for comment.

"We are going to do a watershed management plan in Arkansas, with or without Oklahoma," Young said. "We're ready to proceed."

Poultry litter, the concoction of wood chips, rice hulls and bird manure that's removed from poultry houses, is spread by farmers on fields to help crops grow. Litter contains phosphorus, which can be carried by rain into streams, where it can degrade water quality.

"Unfortunately, the legal aspects have taken over and we are at a standstill," said Richard Seybolt, the compact commission's federal chairman. "When this is resolved, we need to be in position to do our work."

Copyright © 2001-2006 Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Inc. All rights reserved.  
Contact: [webmaster@nwanews.com](mailto:webmaster@nwanews.com)